



SOFFA Questions and Answers

A FORGE FAQ Sheet

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Q: Isn't a SOFFA a piece of furniture?

A: Absolutely not! SOFFA is an acronym that stands for Significant Others, Friends, Family and Allies of one or more transsexual, transgendered, or intersex persons. And while SOFFAs often resemble the furniture their name looks like (the 'o' in SOFFA should be pronounced like the 'o' in soft, to distinguish it from the couch), by providing comfort and support to transgendered loved ones, SOFFAs are also much, much more.

Q: Like what?

A: On a personal level, SOFFAs frequently provide practical and financial as well as emotional support to the transgendered person(s) in their life.

On the community level, SOFFAs play important roles as organizers of transgender events and support groups; as providers of support, assistance, and professional services; and as developers of community resources such as resource lists, publications, and websites.

SOFFAs' most critical role, however, may be as educators and advocates. Although no one can describe the experience of being transgender or intersex as well as someone who is himself transgender or intersex, what SOFFAs offer are models of acceptance: how the world can and should embrace its transgendered members. SOFFAs

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are the bridge between the transgender and non-transgendered communities, allowing those who can't quite imagine themselves having transgendered feelings to at least imagine being a SOFFA: someone who has somehow come to have a transgendered loved one in his or her life. This bridge to empathy is a powerful tool in furthering the transgender community's goal of full acceptance and rights.

Q: How many SOFFAs actually use this ability to be advocates and educators on behalf of the transgender community?

A: Lots. In 1998, Parents, Friends and Family of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) added transgendered persons to its mission statement, signaling the intention of this powerful advocacy and education organization to step up its efforts on behalf of transgendered persons and their families and friends. Similarly, COLAGE (Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere) maintains an active outreach program for the children of transgendered parents, and includes transgender families and issues in its education and advocacy work.

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Individual SOFFAs plan and conduct trainings for professional colleagues such as health care workers and university staff; publish articles in and grant interviews to magazines, newspapers, and other media outlets; and serve on speakers bureaus. And hundreds of thousands of individual SOFFAs spread information and model acceptance just by talking about their transgendered loved ones to their friends, neighbors, co-workers, and social contacts.

Q: Hundreds of thousands! Isn't that an outrageously high estimated of how many SOFFAs there are?

A: No, it's not. Let's do the math. If the "average" transgender or intersex person has one intimate partner; two living parents or step-parents; a half-dozen or so aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, or children; twenty or thirty non-transgendered friends and co-workers; and maybe five service providers (doctors, therapists, lawyers, etc.), hir "SOFFA circle" already includes 35-45 persons. Start counting the neighbors, grocery store clerks, bank tellers, and others who may interact with the transgender or intersex person on a weekly basis, and the number easily rises to 50. Multiply that by any guesstimate of

the transgender population, and you'll get a result in the 6 (or even 7!) figure range.

Q: But not all of these people are supportive! Aren't SOFFAs a primary source of problems for transgendered individuals?

A: Yes, they are. Except for the transgendered person himself, no one has to struggle as hard with gender roles and stereotypes, issues of identity, lack of information, and others' ignorance and prejudice as the partners, family members, and close friends of transgendered persons. Frequently, SOFFAs confronted - sometimes suddenly - with the enormity of this challenge react by attempting to persuade the transgendered person to renounce his gender identity, or immediately terminate the relationship.

Some, unfortunately, never move beyond this place of denial and rejection. A large proportion, however, eventually do sort through their feelings and stereotypes and reaffirm their commitment to and love for the transgendered person in their life.

Q: But the transgender person is the same as she always was -- the only difference now is that the SOFFA has more information about the transgender person. Why can't SOFFAs just accept the new information, reaffirm their love, support the transgender person, and continue on as before?

A: Although a few SOFFAs DO react just like you'd hope, for most the task isn't that simple.

Their first job is to change their view of the transgender individual to incorporate the new information. They may also be asked to immediately cease using the name and pronoun by which they've referred to their loved one for years (perhaps decades), a task that can be surprisingly difficult.

Then they must confront everyone else: who else must be told? How will THEY react? Will the SOFFA lose friends, community standing, income?

Struggling with these fears may well lead the SOFFA back to concerns about his or her transgendered loved one: won't she

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face prejudice, maybe even violence and death? Will sie lose hir job? What about the health risks of all those hormones and surgeries? How will all of this stuff get PAID for, anyway?

Parents may well believe they caused their child's "abnormal" gender identity, and spend countless hours in remorseful, self-blaming (or spouse-blaming) review of their childrearing practices.

The partner of a transgender or intersex person who intends to transition socially from one gender role to another faces especially difficult challenges. The transsexual partner's efforts to achieve congruence between hir inner gender identity and what everyone sees create INcongruence in the non-transgendered partner's sexual orientation identity. In simpler terms, a partner who identifies as either heterosexual or Lesbian/Gay will suddenly be perceived by everyone as having the opposite identity. Some partners find this threat to their sexual orientation identity intolerable, particularly (as is often the case) if their place in their community is threatened as others' perceptions of them changes. Partners of transitioning transsexuals also worry whether they will continue to be attracted to their partner's altered body and/or gender presentation.

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Finally, we can't forget that the existence of transgendered persons challenges all of our society's assumptions about gender, gender roles, and sexual orientation (to note but the most obvious categories). Virtually all SOFFAs find themselves wrestling with these assumptions, too, both in themselves and in others. Some SOFFAs even find themselves confronting their own gender identity issues and/or reviewing and challenging a whole range of social norms and expectations.

Q: Whew! That's quite a list! Given all the issues SOFFAs deal with and their potential as transgender advocates and educators, how come more of them don't attend transgender groups and events?

A: Some transgender support and educational/advocacy groups explicitly bar SOFFAs from attending or joining. Other times, the exclusion is implicit: a SOFFA attends a group or conference, sees few or no other SOFFAs, finds that the group doesn't address any of her or his issues, and never comes back.

Sometimes SOFFAs think they aren't welcome or that their presence isn't appropriate. This perception, unfortunately, is sometimes created by transgender persons, who neglect to include SOFFAs and SOFFA issues in promotional, educational, and resource materials or fail to note the presence of SOFFAs when they report on completed events. SOFFA activists have also been explicitly told by transgender persons that they do not belong in leadership or public education and advocacy roles. Some SOFFAs have cut all organizational ties to the transgender community as a result.

Q: Well, maybe it's not as important for them to be in support and advocacy groups. After all, they're not as subject to violence and discrimination as their trans loved ones are.

A: Not true! Consider Philip DeVine and Lisa Lambert. Don't recognize their names? Do you recognize the name Brandon Teena? Then you should also know Lisa Lambert and Philip DeVine – they were the SOFFAs killed because of their acceptance of Brandon Teena. Unfortunately, virtually no trans website or memorial list for murdered transgendered people includes their names. Indeed, many trans publications imply that Brandon Teena was alone when he was killed. Does that fact make you wonder how many other transpeople who have been attacked or murdered were with SOFFAs who were also victimized? It should.

SOFFAs have lost jobs, housing, community, friends -- all the things trans people can lose – because of their association with trans loved ones. The transphobia they are subjected to ranges from assault to struggles with health care professionals to “simply” being subjected to offensive or insensitive questions people are too embarrassed to ask a trans person. Even those who are fortunate enough to live in places where there is strong trans advocacy seldom can get help when they are victimized: most if not all of the laws making it illegal to discriminate against someone who is trans do *not* cover cases where someone was fired because it became known his or her partner (or parent, or child, or friend) was trans, and virtually no trans advocacy or education groups are addressing the many ways in which SOFFAs are victimized because they love someone trans.

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Q: So how can transsexual, transgender and intersex persons support SOFFAs and encourage their involvement in transgender groups and activities?

A: There are lots of ways to support SOFFAs and encourage their involvement in the transgender community. Here are eight.

1. Explicitly invite them: in person, in all of your group's promotional materials, and whenever you speak publicly about your group.
2. Understand that SOFFAs face their own difficult issues, and be respectful and supportive as they work through them.
3. Integrate SOFFA-related topics and speakers into your meetings and conferences. (Transgender persons need to hear these, too!)
4. Compile and/or disseminate resource lists and publications specifically addressing SOFFAs and their issues.
5. Open your leadership and public speaking positions to SOFFAs, and encourage SOFFAs to fill these roles.
6. Acknowledge and honor the important support, education, and advocacy work SOFFAs perform, both publicly and person-to-person.
7. When you advocate for new laws, policies, or educational efforts on behalf of transgender persons, make sure you cover and protect SOFFAs as well.
8. Finally, remember that NO ONE who is doing the hard work of making the world a better place for gender variant people is getting enough thanks. Consider thanking or even hugging the SOFFAs you know; you just may find yourself getting thanked and hugged in return.

For more SOFFAs information, please refer to the SOFFA Resource List on the web, located at <http://members.nbci.com/ftmsofaq/soffaresourcelist.html> for lists of email support groups, internet chats, regional resources, publications, websites and other resources.

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